

Leadership the “Leahy Way”



By Colonel Gregg F. Martin

One of the most effective NCO leaders I have ever known was First Sergeant Edwin Leahy, Bravo Company, 79th Engineer Battalion, based in Karlsruhe, Germany, with whom I was privileged to serve from June 1984 to November 1985.

“Top” Leahy ran our company with a spirit, enthusiasm, and competence that was unmatched in my experience. Thanks in large part to his phenomenal leadership, Bravo Company excelled at just about everything. It seemed that all we touched turned to gold. The soldiers, NCOs, and officers were fired up with a can-do attitude and sense of pride. Our achievements in war-fighting readiness, training, maintenance, partnership, sports, and community support were usually rated “best in the battalion.” We took care of our people and developed them as future leaders. We had fun and enjoyed our time together, whether in the mud, dust, or snow at Grafenwoehr; on the ranges or troop construction missions; in the field; with our allied partnership units; or on the athletic fields. Although Top and I were truly a “team,” there was never any doubt in my mind—or anyone else’s—that Top Leahy was “The Man.”

Let me describe Top Leahy. First, he was an absolutely powerful presence. He exuded confidence, strength, and charisma. He looked old and mean, with a full head of black hair that he slicked back, 1950s style. He had “LOVE” tattooed on one set of knuckles, “HATE” on the other. He grew up in a rough part of New Hampshire and spoke with a thick Northeastern accent. Except for his tour on “The Trail” and some time in jail, he spent all of his Army time down in the trenches, leading engineer soldiers. He was a hard man.

Top was respected, admired, loved, and feared—all at the same time. He loved the company and his soldiers, and no one dared to cross him or mess



with his company. His ability to quickly cut through the fog and confusion of events, competing priorities, and complexities never ceased to amaze me. It seemed that a hundred things could be going on, then several crises would hit simultaneously, and Top would instantaneously know what to do, how to do it, and in which priority. He was brilliant. He would run his solution by me for input and concurrence, then we would proceed from there. Despite his tough exterior, he always took time to explain his logic and thought process. In short, he was a wonderful teacher and coach who was developing and mentoring “his” company commander, just as he had mentored his previous commander, then Captain Bob Derrick.

Totally dedicated to the company, the troops, and the mission, Top came to work early and worked a full day. He was always on top of everything in the company and always knew what was happening throughout the battalion. He maintained total “situational awareness” 24/7.

Although we did not have official family readiness groups (FRGs) in those days, Top and his wife did this informally, but most effectively. Mrs. Leahy was the “Company Mom.” She pulled together the NCO, enlisted, and officer wives (the company was all-male) on a regular basis to talk business and have fun. The wives became a tight-knit group and took care of their own. She was originally from France, so they had many fun excursions across the border for shopping, restaurants, and sightseeing. When the company deployed, or when tragedy struck, this paid off big time. To this day, my wife says that this informal, close group of wives was the most effective FRG she has ever seen, and the beauty of it was that *they all wanted to get together because it was so much fun.*

Top always loved to have fun. He spoke French and German and was the most enthusiastic participant in partnership activities that I have ever seen. We trained with, did exchanges with, and simply had fun with our allies. Top never saw a partnership event that he didn’t like. And I knew that once we went out the door, it was going to be a late night. Wisely, he always brought a designated driver. We built a tremendous amount of good will and truly enhanced our interoperability, which would have paid off in combat if we had ever fought the “big one” in Central Europe. Moreover, he included junior NCOs and soldiers in these events, which was a huge morale builder and one of his ways of growing leaders.

By today’s standards, Top’s physical condition was not as good as it should have been. Although not a big fan of PT, he was strong and robust and had unlimited energy. There is no doubt that he drank too much and ate too much delicious—but high-cholesterol—foods, and the two packs of unfiltered Camels he smoked every day did not help his wind. When I tried to convince him to change to

a healthier lifestyle, his response was, “Life is short, I’ve already lived longer than I should have, and I actually like this stuff... So thanks, Cap’n, but I ain’t changin’.” In terms of more running and aerobic fitness, his answer was, “Sir, I’ve been in combat, and although I did sprint some short distances from time to time, I never ran a long distance anywhere. And if I’m ever in combat again and need to get somewhere, I won’t run! If need be, I’ll hijack a truck, or cut some poor commie bastard’s throat and take his. But thanks for your concern, Cap’n. I appreciate it.”

In terms of technical and tactical competence, there was none better. He expertly ran the company with seeming ease. He knew and could execute every mission flawlessly—from weapons to demolition, to construction, to maintenance. In tense situations, I saw him leap into the fray (even if it was mud or wet concrete)—with spit-shined boots and starched fatigues—and take charge to make sure that the mission got accomplished to standard and that no one got hurt. He taught and coached through his personal example. There was nothing he asked his troops to do that he had not already done or wouldn’t do again. And they all knew it.

Top always kept mission accomplishment, concern for his people, and loyalty up, down, and sideways in perfect harmony. He intuitively knew how to do this and was a wonderful coach and advisor to his young commander and lieutenants. Given the operational tempo, the number of competing priorities, and the rapid changes that demanded flexibility and adaptability, I would sometimes hit the frustration level and want to go do battle with folks up at battalion. Top was marvelous in calming me down and channeling my energy into more productive venues (and keeping his cap’n “from steppin’ on it”). On the other hand, when it *was* time to do battle with higher headquarters, Top let me know, and we often went up to headquarters as a team. And when we did, we rarely lost.

We developed our quarterly training briefs together and briefed as a team from handwritten butcher charts. Top knew exactly how to orchestrate these in such a way that he charmed the battalion commander and command sergeant major and



First Sergeant Leahy with author, left, and his other company commander (Colonel Bob Derrick, who was the Bravo Company, 79th Engineer Battalion, commander before Colonel Martin) on the right, dedicating the 79th Engineer Battalion plaque at ENFORCE 2002.

got them to grant Bravo Company much of what we requested. He was brilliant and a true master of how to be totally loyal to me, his soldiers, the battalion commander, and peers. Simultaneously, he could get the battalion commander to love him and the company and give us the resources we requested.

What is the relevance of this story? Top Leahy epitomized the NCO Creed. When I think of professional competence—tactical, technical, and leadership—I think of his calibrated and seasoned eyeball, evaluating any situation thrown at him and instantly knowing exactly what to do and how best to handle it. When I think about how to balance mission accomplishment with the welfare of my troops, I often think of Top Leahy. When I think about knowing my soldiers, keeping them informed, and being fair and impartial, I think of him. Top Leahy showed me how to earn the respect and confidence of my superiors as well as that of my soldiers. His life was an example of loyalty to those with whom he served: “seniors, peers, and subordinates alike.” He always took the initiative and never compromised his integrity or moral courage. He was always totally candid, while also being diplomatic when necessary.

In short, Top Leahy lived and modeled—every day—what it meant to

be a professional NCO in the U.S. Army. He and his NCOs in Bravo Company gave me and my officers maximum time to accomplish our duties, because we did not have to accomplish theirs. First Sergeant Edwin Leahy showed me—through his life—what it means to be an NCO, “The Backbone of the Army.”

(Note: First Sergeant Edwin S. Leahy [1944-2003] passed away recently in Rolla, Missouri. He is survived by his wife Sandy, four children, one sister, and five grandchildren. His protégés from Bravo Company, 79th Engineer Battalion, include—among a large number of great Americans—Colonel Bob Derrick, who went on to command the 307th Engineer Battalion, the 20th Engineer Brigade, and now the U.S. Corps of Engineers Transatlantic Command; and Lieutenant Colonel Clarence “Dave” Turner, who currently commands the 14th Engineer Battalion in Iraq. To this day, the three of us are still in awe of First Sergeant Leahy.)



Colonel Martin commanded the Bravo “Bulldogs,” 79th Engineer Battalion, from June 1984 to November 1985, in Karlsruhe and Grafenwoehr, Germany. He currently commands the 130th Engineer Brigade, of V (U.S.) Corps and CJTF-7, in Iraq.